In literal terms, no one alive in the twenty-first century remembers the American Civil War. William Marvel’s 1991 article in *Blue and Gray* dated the death of the last Civil War veteran, a Union man, at 1956. A child born on the day of the Confederate surrender would have had to have lived to just shy of 135 years to have seen in the present century. This war has, however, remained part of a national and international memory despite there being no living person today able to say “I was there.” What we “remember,” then, is perhaps more accurately described as what we perceive or believe about the Civil War, principally composed of a plethora of stories, images, and icons, factual and fictional, from a relatively finite range of public and published forms, among these being school textbooks, memorial and heritage sites, memoirs, academic publishing, television documentaries, and narrative cinema.

For many Americans and others, Hollywood films are the primary shapers of Civil War images. Cinema has long been recognized as a core mechanic in the mediation of historical events, whether recent or distant, helping to create a form of collective memory. Paul Grainge, for example, writes, “As a technology able to picture and embody the temporality of the past, cinema has become central to the mediation of memory in modern cultural life.” Historical filmmaking is part of what John Storey calls the “memory industries”: “that part of the culture industries concerned with articulating the past,” which includes heritage sites, museums, and the mass media. This cinematic genre is predominantly commercial in nature and geared toward popular success, no matter how lofty the filmmaker’s motivation may be to “tell the truth about the war” or to “set the
record straight.” This is certainly the case with regard to American Civil War films.

A steady recycling of motifs—narrative, visual, and musical—can be found in Hollywood’s Civil War films that contribute to both a memorializing and a memorizing of the conflict for those who watch these movies. I call this a “consensus memory,” a manufactured and agreed-upon perception of the war comprising sectional iconography, narrative clichés, heroic deeds, and accepted mythologies about the war’s causes. I see this concept of Hollywood’s Civil War consensus memory as having a strong relationship to Benedict Anderson’s thesis of a “pedagogical industry” in the United States, which strives to make Americans “remember / forget” the war as one between brothers rather than two vast nation-states. In addition, however, the remembering / forgetting of the Civil War occurs at the level of characterization beyond that of “brothers” to extend to forefathers and mothers, and this relational nature of the characters is the basis of this exploration into a consensus memory of the war.

Among other functions, American Civil War films are a means of educating the American viewer as to his/her national identity. To understand Civil War films in this way, they must be regarded as a means of creating a familial link between the on-screen characters and the viewing American. The viewer is invited to identify with central characters whose deeds and values, it is implied, are the outworking of an essential “American-ness” that she/he is party to by virtue of being an American citizen. Even if certain viewers are not able to trace their ancestry back to the 1860s, they are part of a nation that ostensibly lives by the principles valued in those films. I will argue that a number of values or, more precisely, characteristics of the American ancestor feature in Hollywood’s consensus memory of the war to affirm the American viewer’s sense of self.

There are many laudable characteristics in Civil War films, but I shall reduce them to three that seem both tangible and most highly valued. Some lines from Ronald F. Maxwell’s 2003 film, Gods and Generals, offer a particularly good illustration of this. On the occasion of her sons leaving for Richmond as soldiers of the South, mother Jane Beale’s speech begins with the words “We must not fear the final result of this war but many a loved one will fall and many a heart throb with anguish before we can breathe the exhilarating atmosphere of freedom, and feel the sweet assurance of safety and peace once more.” She ends with the following assertion: “Surely goodness and mercy have followed me all the days of my life.” With this, she embraces her sons and sends them on their way with “God be with you.”

Principles